



Op-Ed: Fixing the Future Rather Than the Past

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To succeed, we must update, balance, and integrate all of the tools of American power. . . . This requires close cooperation with Congress and a deliberate and inclusive interagency process so that we achieve integration of our efforts to implement and monitor operations, policies, and strategies.

National Security Strategy of May 2010

The Cold War required a “national security state” with large military forces along with an engaged diplomacy focused on the issues of national existence and military interventions in proxy wars backed by Keynesian economics and a government-fueled economy. Over the last 65 years, the National Security Council (NSC) and the national security system¹ have probably best served the President and nation under Presidents Harry S Truman (NSC-68 and containment of the Soviet Union), Dwight D. Eisenhower (getting things right early in the Cold War), Richard M. Nixon (rebalancing relationships with the Soviet Union and China), and George H. W. Bush (managing the first Gulf War and German reunification). Each of these major achievements was undertaken with a strong sense of strategic cooperation between the President and Congress. The question today is whether the NSC supported by the National Security Staff in its roles as strategic manager and developer of the national security system can get the big things right and assist and advise the President in a rational discourse and strategic collaboration with Congress.

The answer to that question is not preordained. The problems of our national security system are deeply rooted in its structures: the constitutional invitation to conflict between the executive and the legislative branches of government; the hierarchical and functional divisions of departments; and the extraordinarily cumbersome and layered procedures, such as budgeting by which decisions are channeled. A radically changed security environment poses vastly different and more complex challenges and opportunities. These increasingly require new mechanisms, organizations, and processes.

Concerns about the misalignment of organizational arrangements and demands of the security environment of the 21st century are not new. The Hart-Rudman Commission (1998), 9/11 Commission (2004), Project on National Security Reform (2008), and numerous other studies have urged a dramatic overhaul of the national security system. Critics, Congress, and *cognoscenti*, in one report or another, have called for both a new grand strategy and implementation of a variety of strategic system management functions and enabling capabilities.²

In 1950, NSC-68 had the intellectual power to unite the reorganized executive and legislative branches in the execution of the grand strategy of containment of the Soviet Union. Public officials, led by Paul Nitze, director of the Policy Planning Office at the State Department, did the hard strategy work operationalizing Kennan's intellectual foundations through strategic decisions on resources and the elements of national power. President Eisenhower's Project Solarium focused on competitive strategies and resource constraints and further confirmed the ways in which the national security system would implement containment. This grand strategy was simple, readily understood across government, and easily translated into action: "The United States will contain the Soviet Union by forming strong alliances, assuring allies that we will stand by them, and maintaining sufficient military and nuclear dominance to deter Soviet aggression."³ The existential threat to the nation's security and physical existence posed by the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact endured across eight administrations and provided a basis for bipartisan, broad governmental continuity of effort until the end of the Cold War. Today, we have only begun to discuss a strategic narrative that would address fundamental questions about the nature of America's power and purposes and how to marry power to purpose in a changing world.⁴

The current national security system needs to be transformed to one that is truly managed as a system of systems in both the executive and legislative branches. Even though this transformation would not preclude the recent proliferation of "Black Swan" events, it would institutionalize system management, enable foresight at the strategic level, and provide the President with the ability to

get beyond campaign promises and urgent crisis responses to think about and respond better to the slow-moving, inexorable challenges that are more obvious, but perhaps politically inconvenient to acknowledge and act upon. Such challenges are exemplified by: the housing crisis and economic situation that developed over the course of three presidencies; loss of strategic competitiveness in education, infrastructure, technology and manufacturing; resource competition; and, climate change. These challenges led both the Director of National Intelligence Admiral Dennis Blair and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen to declare in 2009 that the greatest threat to our national security was the economy, not traditional military threats that had shaped our national security system since 1947.

Equally important, given a true national security strategy based on ends, ways and means, a strategically-managed national security system could assist the president in addressing strategic choices. These would include giving up older priorities and structures based on new tradeoffs and “foreseeing” what is now less important rather than just what may surprise us (“Black Swans” and the continuous need for crisis management). Do we really need to keep military bases in Europe? Borrow billions from the Chinese for a military to contain China in our “strategic pivot” to Asia and the Pacific? Continue our old approaches to foreign aid and development?

In the *National Security Strategy of May 2010*, the Obama administration called for a transformed system based on a whole-of-government approach. In response, Congress required the President to submit an implementation plan for the organizational goals of that strategy. Section 1072, of H.R. 1540, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2012, mandates:

Not later than 270 days after the date of the enactment of this Act, the President shall submit to the appropriate congressional committees an implementation plan for achieving the whole-of-government integration vision prescribed in the President's National Security Strategy of May 2010. The implementation plan shall include... an outline of specific actions desired or required to be taken by Congress to achieve each component of the whole-of-government vision prescribed in the National Security Strategy, including suggested timing and sequencing of actions proposed for Congress and the Executive agencies; . . .

This congressionally-mandated report offers the same chance for the executive and legislative branches to come together as they did after World War II with the Navy's Eberstat Report and the Congressional Reorganization Act of 1946. However, rather than focus on fixing the past as was done in the National Security Act of 1947, the focus should be on how to fix the future and embark in a forward-looking, functional executive-legislative strategic partnership that will guarantee our nation's security and well-being far into the future.

In today's bitterly partisan atmosphere, unilateral actions by the President to transform the national security system are viewed as admissions of weakness and perhaps failure. Yet the opportunity to do the right thing and get the big things right in cooperation with Congress — either as the signal accomplishment of a second-term president or as the initial step of a first-term President — is both unprecedented and fleeting. The congressionally mandated Section 1072 report — due just 1 month before the presidential election — presents a unique opportunity for creating a strategic framework to address these fundamental national security issues and establishing a collaborative dialogue and partnership with Congress. President Obama has clearly identified the role of the NSC/National Security Staff as strategic managers of the national security system in the two organizational documents he has issued so far — PDD-1 (*Organization of the National Security Council System*) and the PSD-1 (*Organizing for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism*) decision memorandum. His *National Security Strategy of May 2010* not only reinforces this focus on transformed strategic system management by the national security advisor and the National Security Staff but specifically calls for implementation of these functions as well as a prominent identification of the need for a corps of national security professionals across the federal government.

Our current “Pearl Harbor legacy” national security system in both the executive and legislative branches strongly reinforces the old adage of “being able to describe every tree in the forest, but unable to describe the forest itself.” Congressional oversight has expanded well beyond the 1946 re-alignment under the armed services and foreign affairs committees. At least six Senate and seven House committees have jurisdiction over some aspect on national security. These uncoordinated efforts lead to a piecemeal approach. The complex global security environment today demands that congressional oversight be strategic, holistic, and focused on achieving the goals of the national security strategy. This requires strategic congressional oversight of integrated, mission-oriented interagency budgets and assessment of policy outcomes rather than the current myopic focus on inputs and traditional agency competencies and programs.

The national security system should not be a bitter, partisan, adversarial process or game of “gotcha” — either between the executive and legislative branches or within and among the stove-piped executive departments and agencies bound to and protected by their congressional patrons. Both branches must realize that we are saddled with a legacy national security system designed to avoid the failure at Pearl Harbor. It allowed us to muddle through the Cold War, but it is inappropriate and irrelevant for today's national security challenges. The President has clearly stated that the national security system must be transformed if the nation is to remain a relevant, effective global leader in the 21st century.

The National Security Act of 1947 (as amended in 1949) attempted to fix the problems of the past in the hope that the security arrangement required in the future would be sufficiently similar for the fixes to have value. Lacking a real debate, the post-Cold War fixes to the national security system resulted in the four-tiered NSC system that once again fixed the system for past defects. The future beyond the Cold War, 9/11, and the economic crisis of 2008 is more discontinuous than the change after World War II. That does not explain why we have not had this debate at the highest levels, but it does suggest that the same retroactive approach to “fixing” our national security system would be a mistake. In that regard, the *CSIS 2012 Global Forecast: Risk Opportunity and the Next Administration* notes that the contraction of resources at home and rising volatility and complexity of challenges overseas, while not necessarily equating to American decline, do mean added risk: “Every senior national security leader in Washington is struggling with how to allocate shrinking resources on hand to address an expanding problem set.”⁵

We are, as we were in 1946-47, faced with strategic choices on how to allocate resources and control our destiny. The President's *National Security Strategy* properly describes the future and recognizes the role that Congress must play in providing answers. Through Section 1072, Congress has accepted the President's invitation to debate and fix the future rather than the past. The President's response to the reporting requirements of Section 1072 — to include what Congress can and should do as a committed strategic partner in an historic joint venture — can and should be the first step to true transformation of the national security system and meeting the intent of the President's *National Security Strategy* to preserve the nation's security and prosperity in the 21st century.

Endnotes

1. Complex whole of all U.S. national security institutions.

2. See Nina Serafino, Katherine Dale, and Pat Towell, *Building Civilian Interagency Capacity for Missions Abroad: Key Proposals and Issues for Congress*, Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, December 22, 2011, for an excellent summary of these studies. See also Senators Gary Hart and Warren Rudman co-chairs, *U.S. Commission on National Security/21st Century*, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1999-2001; National Commission on Terrorist Attacks on the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report*, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, July 22, 2004; *Beyond Goldwater-Nichols: U.S. Government and Defense Reform for a New Strategic Era: Phase 2 Report*, Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 2005; Peter Feaver and William Inboden, “A Strategic Planning Cell on National Security at the White House,” and Bruce W. Jentleson, “An Integrative Executive Branch Strategy for Policy Planning,” in Daniel W. Drezner, *Avoiding Trivia: The Role of Strategic Planning in American Foreign Policy*, Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2009; Michele A. Flournoy and Shawn W. Brimley, “Strategic Planning for National Security: A New Project Solarium,” *Joint Forces Quarterly*, No. 41, Spring 2006; Michele A. Flournoy and Shawn W. Brimley, *Strategic Planning for U.S. National Security: A Project Solarium for the 21st Century*, Princeton, NJ: The Princeton Project on National Security, September 2006; Aaron L. Friedberg, “Strengthening U.S. Strategic Planning,” *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 31, No. 1, Winter 2007/2008, The Center for Strategic and International Studies and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, pp. 47-60; Project on National Security Reform, *Forging a New Shield*, Arlington, VA, 2008, and *Turning Ideas into Action*, September 2009; Andrew Krepinevich, “Hearing of the Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee of the House Armed Services Committee: National Security Reform,” Washington, DC: Federal News Service, March 19, 2009; Bruce W. Jentleson, “An Integrative Executive Branch Strategy for Policy Planning,” in Daniel W. Drezner, *Avoiding Trivia: The Role of Strategic Planning in American Foreign Policy*, Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2009; and Paul Lettow and Tom Mahnken, “Toolbox: Getting Serious about Strategic Planning,” *The American Interest*, Vol. 5, No. 1, Autumn 2009.

3. Rosa Brooks, “Obama Needs a Grand Strategy,” *Foreign Policy*, January 23, 2012, available from www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/01/23/obama_needs_a_grand_strategy?page=0,0.

4. See Mr. Y, *A National Strategic Narrative*, Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2011; Michele A. Flournoy and Shawn Brimley, *Finding Our Way: Debating American Grand Strategy*, Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, June 2008; and, Richard Fontaine and Kristin M. Lord eds., *America's Path: Grand Strategy for the Next Administration*, Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, May 2012.

5. Craig Cohen and Josiane Gabel, eds., *2012 Global Forecast: Risk, Opportunity and the Next Administration*, Washington, DC: CSIS, 2012, p 2.

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